

POTOMAC WATERSHED ROUNDTABLE
Quarterly Meeting - January 14, 2022
Held Virtually Via Microsoft Teams Platform
Meeting Summary

Voting Members/Alternates

Hon. Penny Gross, Potomac Watershed Roundtable Chair, Fairfax County
Hon. Tinesha Allen, Stafford County
Nicki Bellezza, Fairfax Water
Hon. James Christian, Loudoun SWCD
Deidre Clark, John Marshall SWCD
Laura Grape, Northern Virginia SWCD
Hon. Amy Jackson, City of Alexandria
Karen Pallansch, Alexandria Renew
Hon. Robert Pickett, Northern Neck SWCD
Greg Prelewicz, Fairfax Water

Advisory Members/Alternates (Non-Voting)

Kirsten Conrad, Virginia Cooperative Extension
Debbie Cross, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
Curtis Dalpra, ICPRB
Terry Lasher, Virginia Department of Forestry
Rebecca Shoemaker, Virginia DEQ

Presenters

Aaron Berryhill, Solar Program Manager, Virginia Department of Energy

Interested Parties

John Bateman, Northern Neck Planning District
Meghan Cunha, Northern Virginia SWCD
Aleta Daniels, John Marshall SWCD
Kyle Dingus, Loudoun County
Judy Fraser, Northern Virginia SWCD
Maria Harwood, Northern Virginia SWCD
Devyn Keller, Virginia Energy
Don Lacquement, Northern Virginia SWCD
Elizabeth Lonoff
Anne "Sunny" Matheson, Home Waters Foundation
Heather Shackley, Northern Virginia SWCD
Jennifer Starr, Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay
Veronica Tangiri, Prince William SWCD
Elizabeth Ward, Green Risks
Kerry Wharton, Fauquier County
Willie Woode, Northern Virginia SWCD

Call to Order

Ms. Gross called the meeting to order at 10:03 am and welcomed all to the meeting. She introduced herself and wished everyone a happy new year.

The agenda had been sent out to participants before the meeting.

Minutes—July 9, 2021

The minutes of the July 9, 2021 meeting of the Potomac Watershed Roundtable had been distributed in advance of the meeting. Hearing no corrections, the minutes were approved by consensus.

Updates from the Roundtable Chair

Ms. Gross reported that Ms. Grape had an announcement to make. Ms. Grape thanked Ms. Gross and reported that her last day at the Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District would be on Friday, February 4, 2022. She has accepted a position as the Director of the Fairfax County Park Authority Resource Management Division. She expressed her appreciation for the work of NVSWCD and her pleasure to serve the greater community through the Potomac Council and Potomac Watershed Roundtable.

Ms. Gross expressed her appreciation for Ms. Grape, noting that they had worked together at the Northern Virginia Regional Commission (NVRC). She is thankful that Ms. Grape will not be leaving Fairfax County nor Northern Virginia. Other roundtable members expressed their appreciation for Ms. Grape in the meeting chat.

Ms. Gross acknowledged that there will be a new administration in Richmond beginning tomorrow with the inauguration of Governor Youngkin. She expressed her concern about his proposal to nominate Andrew Wheeler as the Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources. Mr. Wheeler was the Environmental Protection Agency Administrator in the Trump administration and is known for rolling back environmental protections. The job of the Potomac Watershed Roundtable may be more difficult than it has been in the past, especially if the same support from Richmond is not available. Additional education may be needed to maintain progress that has been made.

Potomac Council Update. Ms. Gross invited Mr. Pickett, Vice Chair of the Potomac Council, to provide an overview of the discussion that was held at this morning's Potomac Council meeting. Mr. Pickett reported that the Potomac Council met this morning but did not have a quorum. He reported that the Potomac Council is on track to receive the 2022 grant from the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality. Mr. Pickett also noted that he reached out to Mr. Hynson who serves as Vice Chair of the Potomac Watershed Roundtable. Mr. Hynson expressed his interest in remaining active with the group. Ms. Gross noted that Mr. Hynson's long service with the Potomac Watershed Roundtable and the fact that he is a farmer make his participation invaluable. She is glad he wants to continue.

Clean Energy Transition & Utility-Scale Solar in Virginia

Aaron Berryhill, Solar Program Manager, Virginia Department of Energy

Ms. Gross introduced Mr. Berryhill, provided a brief biography, and thanked him for joining the Potomac Watershed Roundtable this morning. She said that she looked forward to the presentation and to conversation after the presentation. She is particularly interested in the issue of solar farms and the use of agricultural lands for solar arrays.

Mr. Berryhill used a PowerPoint slide presentation to share information with the group. He stated that he wants to share information and learn from the group as well. A copy of Mr. Berryhill's presentation is available on the [Potomac Watershed Roundtable website](#).

Questions and Answers

Ms. Gross thanked Mr. Berryhill for his presentation, noting that it was very complete and thorough. She asked if there were any questions for Mr. Berryhill.

Ms. Gross noted that, in her work with the Virginia Association of Counties (VACO), some of the more rural counties which may have land available for solar farms are concerned about the use of "producing" agricultural lands for this purpose as it would take the agriculture piece out of the economy. There is a desire to use non-producing agricultural lands for this purpose—land that is not suitable for crops. Has there been discussion about this or identification of agricultural lands? Is there additional information about economic development and the workforce needed?

Mr. Berryhill reported that the agricultural question is of the utmost concern to a lot of folks, and he has heard much discussion on this topic. He has seen proposed legislation that would allow for mapping strategies to mitigate the concerns expressed. He noted that he is a planner and believes strongly in the local comprehensive planning process. He agreed that this is a delicate conversation and that every locality would approach it a little differently, stressing that localities are the ones that can identify the active lands and map them and identify land for protection.

Ms. Gross noted that VACO has worked on a handbook for counties to help with the process of siting and approval of these facilities to help avoid missteps and misunderstandings.

As far as workforce and economic development is concerned, Mr. Berryhill reported that a fair number of jobs are created in the construction, engineering, and procurement phases of projects. There is also work to be done in site upkeep and general maintenance. A lot of counties have encouraged or required that local businesses be able to do those upkeep jobs. He noted that the construction phase can last about a year and can provide a lot of jobs. Mr. Berryhill also mentioned that there is a program called SHINE (Solar Hands-on Instructional Network of Excellence) which is working through the Virginia Community College system to develop a new short-term training program to teach the basic skills needed for entry into this field.

Ms. Grape read a question from the chat for Mr. Berryhill regarding transmission lines and the siting of large arrays. Can the current transmission services support the kind of system in the solar arrays, or is there additional need? Mr. Berryhill replied that the current system is not sufficient to support the plan by 2050. The systems necessary take years to develop because they are complicated. Further, there are ways to improve transmission infrastructure to support the growth. Recognizing that transmission lines do steer where these new projects are being developed, it is important that localities prioritize where there are lands that they want to protect/or use because of the need for additional facilities.

In response to a request from Ms. Gross about the viewpoint of the Virginia Department of Forestry as projects relate to forested lands, Mr. Lasher noted that VDOF sees solar and the impacts of solar being of concern in terms of forest land acreage as well as rural economic development impact because of removal of agricultural and forested land. He noted that there is much to consider including habitats, air quality, temperature reduction, carbon sequestration. Balance will be the key when potential financial and environmental impacts are examined. VDOF has been active in reviewing the process. He noted that some solar will impact forestry in a negative way. The role of VDOF will be to continue to work closely with other state departments—to watch and contribute to this conversation.

In response to a question from Ms. Conrad about what work is being done to utilize urban rooftops instead of surface land, Ms. Gross reported asking the same question at a fall VACO conference and being told that rooftop collection is often too fragmented for what is needed. Ms. Gross asked Mr. Berryhill to talk about the work that is being done to use urban rooftops.

Mr. Berryhill reported that he is a huge proponent of rooftop usage and that it makes a lot of sense and provides an opportunity for future solar generation. He noted that sometimes larger projects provide a level of ease not available with smaller projects. He also said there are some regulatory limits. He noted that they are working on strategies, including power purchase agreements (PPA). Fairfax County has one of the largest PPAs of any government nationally. Furthermore, Fairfax County has been vigorous in building rooftop solar on many of its buildings. While it is not reasonable to offset all electricity needs with rooftop generation, there are steps localities can take to promote solar and reduce “soft” costs. Among them are making sure that the permitting process is clear, that there is a quick turnaround, and reasonable feeds. Mr. Berryhill noted that he does a lot of work with localities to ensure that the process is straightforward.

In response to a question from Ms. Conrad about the predicted impact of this work on climate change, Mr. Berryhill mentioned the Clean Virginia Economy Act in which electricity producers are required to produce their electricity from 100 percent renewable sources by 2050. He noted that there is a partisan side of this and that the change in gubernatorial administrations may change the predicted level of impact, for better or for worse. He also noted that he is not a climate scientist.

In response to a question from Ms. Clark about legal agreements between electric companies and landowners and whether there are boilerplates that can help landowners, Mr. Berryhill said he believed there were some resources. He reported that the Southside Solar Coalition has been active in this area. He cautioned however, that in its public position, his agency has not gotten involved in this aspect of the process. While they want to encourage best practices, they encourage landowners to do their own due diligence.

In response to a question from Ms. Ward about a rule of thumb for storage needed per megawatt for 24/7 power, Mr. Berryhill noted that the data center would operate independently of the grid. Most projects now are being proposed with storage. There are also storage projects that are connected to the grid independently of solar.

In response to a question from Ms. Tangiri about whether rooftop solar panels impact urban temperature or create a “heat island,” Mr. Berryhill noted that solar panels are designed to be as absorbent as possible and shouldn’t be adding heat to the environment.

Ms. Gross introduced Tinesha Allen who is a new representative on the Potomac Roundtable from Stafford County. Ms. Allen asked how families with moderate incomes can go solar? She is aware of some predatory solar companies.

Mr. Berryhill appreciated the question and noted that this is something that they are working on right now. Shared solar is being developed, including programs that would allow people to subscribe to solar and get the benefits. There is also a rebate program in development that would provide a fund for families to get solar at a free or reduced cost. It will be introduced in limited markets but will eventually be statewide. In addition, Mr. Berryhill mentioned some resources available from the utilities themselves. There are a lot of new programs in the works.

Ms. Grape added a link for the [Northern Virginia Solar Map](#) to the chat. She noted that this resource was developed by NVRC to inform residents of their solar potential.

There being no other questions, Ms. Gross thanked Mr. Berryhill for his excellent presentation.

Mr. Berryhill expressed his appreciation to the group and encouraged individuals to reach out to him with additional questions. He may be contacted at Aaron.berryhill@energy.virginia.gov

Updates from Around the Region—Roundtable Discussion

Ms. Gross asked those present to share about what they have been doing in their districts, agencies, and jurisdictions during the last several months. The following information was shared:

Ms. Gross requested topic ideas for future meetings. In response, Ms. Conrad suggested an update on the Healthy Virginia Lawns program, the Virginia “4 the Soil” program, and information on deer impact.

Ms. Clark introduced Aleta Daniels, a new member of the John Marshall SWCD staff.

Ms. Gross reported that the next meetings of the Potomac Watershed Roundtable will be held on Fridays, April 8, July 1, and October 7, 2022. She expressed her hope that there will be an opportunity to hold an in-person meeting later in the year, perhaps in an outdoor setting, but that the meetings may remain virtual for the immediate future for health reasons.

Ms. Gross noted that the April meeting will likely include a legislative update.

Ms. Bellezza reported that the Fairfax Water “[Water Supply Stakeholder Grant](#)” will be available soon. A link to the program website was provided in the chat.

The meeting closed with a round of applause for Ms. Grape. Ms. Gross thanked everyone for their attendance and engagement in the meeting. She noted that the next meeting will be held virtually on Friday, April 8, 2022.

Adjournment.

The meeting adjourned at 11:57 am.